

Korean Zen Legends

Illustrated in Temple Murals

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Part II:
Korean Buddhist Legends

I

A Tree Growing on One's Back: A Tale About the Four Utensils Used in Buddhist Services

Once upon a time, a monk of high moral repute lived in a temple, teaching his disciples, one of whom lived a worldly life against the Buddhist commandments. He consistently disobeyed his master's teachings and did just what he wanted until, in the end, he died of a virulent disease. After his death, he was born again as a giant fish, and he was in great pain, for a large tree began to grow on his back.

One day, when his master was crossing a river by boat, he saw a fish with a tree on its back weeping sorrowfully and putting its head under the side of the boat. The monk went into a deep meditative trance in order to learn about the previous life of the fish. He discovered that the fish was none other than his old disciple who had lived a dissipated life, died of disease, and was now suffering pain as retribution for the deeds of his former life. The monk felt pity for his former student and so he performed the rites for creatures of the water and of the land and for lonely spirits so that his disciple's soul might be released from the form of the fish.

That night, the fish-disciple appeared to his master in a dream. He told his master that he was grateful for his kindness, and he assured him that he had resolved to study the Buddha's teachings diligently. He then requested that his master cut the tree from the fish's back, carve a wooden fish from it, hang it from the ceiling before the statue of the Buddha, and strike it. He said that its sound would be a good lesson for those practicing asceticism, and that it would also be a good cause and occasion for the fish of the rivers and the seas to be delivered from this worldly existence. Therefore, the master cut the tree from the fish's back and made a wooden fish as per his disciple's request. As time passed, the shape of the wooden fish gradually transformed into a simple wooden block, which was more convenient to use, and eventually became one of the most important utensils used in various Buddhist rituals such as sutra chanting and worshipping before the image of the Buddha.

In Korea, almost all large temples have pavilions for bells, and each pavilion has four Buddhist utensils: an iron temple bell, a large leather drum, a cloud-shaped gong, and a wooden fish-shaped block. The monks toll the temple bell while they pray for those in the agonies of hell; they pound the drum for the salvation of all kinds of quadrupeds; they strike the gong in order to comfort all winged animals and insects; and they beat the wooden fish for the salvation of all marine creatures.

Therefore, whenever Korean Buddhist monks strike these four utensils and hear their sounds, they offer a prayer as follows:

“When they hear this sound, may all living creatures, both human beings and animals, attain enlightenment so that they can be free from their agonies.”

Sounding these four utensils is a means of compassion and an act of wishing happiness

and deliverance to all creatures, as well as a way to highlight the dignity of all life.

II

Under the Influence of Five Drops of Honey: A Metaphor for Life

A traveler was walking in a vast wilderness that stretched endlessly. He walked and he walked, but he could see neither road nor habitation. Suddenly an elephant came running towards him. When he saw a beast the size of a house rushing at him as if it were going to trample him in one breath, the traveler fled as swiftly as he could. Nevertheless, he could not get away from the elephant simply by running for there was no place of refuge in sight. In a state of panic, the voyager fortunately chanced upon a well. Luckily for him, the well was empty, and a vine hung down inside it. He quickly grabbed the vine and hid inside the well.

The elephant fiercely pursuing the traveler could not get at him in the small well, so it just circled around it. Having escaped from the elephant by hanging on the vine, the voyager heaved a deep sigh of relief. However, no sooner had he looked around the inside of the well than he was again frightened out of his wits: two rats, one white and one black, were gnawing at the vine above his head! The vine upon which he relied would soon snap and he would then fall to the bottom of the well. Furthermore, four venomous snakes, their tongues darting in and out, leered at him from holes in the various quarters of the inner walls of the well, and a poisonous dragon was seated at the bottom of the well, staring up at him and waiting for him to fall down.

At a loss and trembling like a leaf in terror, the traveler looked upward for a way to get out of the well. He could not see the elephant, but at the mouth of the well he saw sparks and plumes of heavy smoke. A forest-fire had broken out and flames were sweeping all around. He could not conceive of moving in any direction, and so he simply hung by the vine.

Just then, five drops of honey fell on the traveler's lips from somewhere up above. The sweet honey made him forget his fear and the precariousness of his situation, so he turned his eyes in the direction from which the drops of honey came. Seeing a beehive, he opened his mouth and waited for more drops of honey. However, the tree from which the beehive hung began to sway in the wind, and the frightened honeybees began to sting him in the face as they buzzed about him. Now, if the traveler were to release his hold of the vine, he would fall down and be eaten by the dragon, and if he were to move his body in order to escape from the bees, then he would be bitten by the vipers. He could not climb out of the well on account of the raging fire and the fierce elephant, which might still be lurking about, and he could not long remain hanging on the vine because the rats were gnawing it through. Realizing the nature of his situation, the traveler's agony was beyond description.

This story is a metaphor for life in a book of Buddhist tales that teaches about the realities of human existence. In this metaphor, the traveler symbolizes human life itself. The vast wilderness is the long and pitch-dark night with no lights. The elephant represents the vanity

of life. The well is this rough world in which we are born and die. The vine symbolizes the life of each individual. The black rat is night and the white rat day. The four vipers stand for the four elements of human body; namely earth, water, fire, and wind. The five drops of honey are the five human desires, namely those for food, sexual gratification, riches, a good reputation, and a long life. The bees represent evil thoughts. The fire symbolizes aging and sickness. Finally, the poison dragon stands for death.

Just as the traveler in this tale became intoxicated by the sweet drops of honey and forgot about the horrible agonies awaiting him in the well, so too most people do not understand the reality of human life and thus cannot leave their erroneous existences behind.

III

Two Brothers on a Desert Island: The Past Life of the Goddess of Mercy

Long, long ago, a rich man named Changna lived in a small country in southern India. He and his beautiful wife lived happily and unconcernedly. However, several years after their marriage they still remained childless, and so his wife set up an altar and began to pray earnestly for a baby boy. Soon, probably because of these efforts, she became pregnant and gave a birth to a cute little son, and then, three years later, she had another baby boy.

Changna was so happy that he held a big party for all his neighbors. He also called a fortuneteller, and asked him about the future of their children. Bending his head, the fortuneteller said:

“Your two sons are good-looking, but they are fated to lose their parents early because the ties that bind their parents and them together are so weak.” For this reason, the elder brother was named Jori, and the younger one was called Songri. Both names mean “separating from one’s parents early.”

In March of the year when the elder brother was ten and the younger brother was seven, their mother suddenly fell ill. Despite taking all kinds of medicine, she grew worse day by day. One day, she called her two sons to her and said tearfully:

“I am afraid that I will not recover. Although I know that all men must die some day, I am heartbroken at the thought of leaving you two, my young sons. Before I die, please promise me that you will live in a kindly manner, always helping one another.”

After saying this, the mother passed away, and her two sons wept bitterly while embracing her dead body. With his neighbors’ help, Changna held a large funeral service, and then spent the next couple of years caring for his two sons even more lovingly than before.

Many people persuaded Changna to remarry, and eventually he did take a new wife. Since she bore some resemblance to their dead mother, the two brothers were delighted and felt as if she were still alive and had come back to them. Initially, their stepmother pitied them and loved them as well.

The following year there was a bad harvest and, driven by circumstances, Changna left his house in charge of his new wife and set off for a neighboring land in order to trade some of his treasures for crops. Left alone, the stepmother began to have misgivings:

“If my husband does not return, how will I be able to raise his children by myself? And if he does return, then there is no doubt that he will leave all his property to these two sons even if I have a child of my own. In that case, these two boys will be big obstacles for my son.”

Thus, some time later the stepmother manipulated a boatman into abandoning the two boys in a distant place, and so the two brothers were left on a desert island. Unaware that they had been forsaken, they ran about the small island looking for their parents. However,

not a soul was to be found on the island, and no matter how hard they shouted out to their parents and the boatman who brought them there, they heard only the sound of wind and the splashing waves.

Cast off on a desolate island, Jori and Songri began to starve and were soon at death's door. As he neared his final hour, the younger brother, Songri, grieved over the fact that they had been deceived and were going to die miserably. The elder brother, Jori, listened in silence and then reasoned thus with his brother:

“At first I also cursed the world and held a grudge against those who placed us here. However, there is nothing to be done. Rather than feeling bitter, we should regard this painful experience as an opportunity to think about delivering people who suffer misfortunes when we are born again in the next world. Haven't we already learned in this life that comforting others is the very way to be comforted by others?”

When he heard this, the younger brother's face lit up, and then they both looked up at the sky and made a great and holy vow:

“Even though we die now, we would like to become venerable in the next world so that we can deliver unfortunates like us. We will give food and clothes to the impoverished, and we will heal those who suffer from disease.”

In this way, the two brothers made a total of thirty-two vows and then died embracing each other. Although they died forsaken on a lonely desert island, they wore calm and bright smiles upon their faces when they expired. Tradition says that the name of the island is Botarakah (the name of the mountain where the Goddess of Mercy dwells) because the older brother became the Goddess of Mercy [who is depicted on the left side of Buddha in traditional triptychs], while the younger brother became Daesaechi [the Bodhisattva seated at the Buddha's right hand side].

IV

A Young Boy who Ascended to Heaven Riding a Wooden Horse: The Story of the Ahjabang in Chilboolam*

Towards the middle of the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910), a new governor was appointed in Hadong county and proceeded to his post. While examining his territories, one day he came to visit Ssanggye Temple, where he decided to view the famous ahjabang (“meditation chamber”) in the Chilboolam (“hermitage of the Seven Buddhas”). When the governor and his staff arrived, the monks were practicing Zen meditation in the ahjabang. Just then, an old monk emerged from the backyard, and the governor’s assistant said to him:

“Our new governor is here to see the sights of this place.”

The old monk welcomed them gladly saying:

“Welcome. However, I am sorry to say that there is nothing very special to see here, since this place is only a mountain retreat for meditation.”

The governor replied to the old monk:

“Do not worry, venerable monk, I only wish to briefly visit the ahjabang.”

With a perplexed look, the old monk replied:

“I am sorry, but the room is now occupied by monks who are studying Zen meditation, so I cannot show it to you.”

Nonetheless, the visitors did not turn back and, ignoring the old monk’s pleas not to enter the room, the governor walked up the stairs with long strides, opened the door, looked in, and was surprised by an unexpected scene. It was just after lunchtime and all the monks were dozing off in post-meal languor! Each monk was in a different posture—some of them had fallen asleep while looking up at the ceiling; some were bending their faces towards the ground; some were swaying back and forth; and some of them were farting violently. Stunned by this scene, the governor closed the door, descended with a knit brow, and exclaimed:

“I have heard that this is a place where high priests and virtuous monks study in search of Truth. But what kind of study is this?”

Then, with a reprimanding tone in his voice, he began to question the old monk:

“First of all, what manner of study is it to doze off while looking up at the ceiling?”

The old monk replied by quoting proverbs composed of four Chinese characters that are illustrative of various principles, thus:

“Look-Heaven-Star-Lodge (仰天星宿). This is to deliver all people by studying the constellations.”

The governor asked again:

“Well then, what about the monks who are bending their faces down to the ground?”

The old monk answered:

“Earth-Down-Die-Spirit (地下亡靈). They are thinking about how to redeem the spirits of the dead in the underworld from their karma.”

“Well, what about those who are swaying back and forth with as little firmness as a willow?”

“Spring-wind-willow-willow (春風楊柳). This is the study of the attainment of profundity by keeping unbiased thoughts of existence and nonexistence, of good and evil, and of joys and sorrows.”

Quite surprised that the old monk did not hesitate at all in answering him, the governor asked him one more thing.

“Well, what kind of study is sitting and breaking wind?”

The old monk answered:

“Lacquer-tub-strike-break (漆桶打破). This is to enlighten merciless people with black hearts who do not listen to others and only want to have everything their own way.”

The governor had nothing more to ask, so he said:

“If you are right, then these monks must be every bit as great and admirable as I have heard, so let me give you an assignment. I will set a wooden horse in my courtyard. Tomorrow, come and show me that it can be ridden. If you cannot manage this task, the meditation room will be closed, and the public will be very disappointed.”

After the governor and his staff had left, all the monks gathered together in a large room and talked over the matter with great concern. However, they could not devise any clever method until late at night. At that point, a young boy who had been sitting silently in a corner of the room stood up and said:

“O venerable monks, do not trouble yourselves about this matter. I will go to the governor’s court and deal with the task.”

When they heard this, some of the monks scolded him.

“What? How can you possibly do that? You are a mere lad!”

However, there was no other solution and so on the morrow the young boy went to the court, got on the wooden horse, and slapped its rump. Immediately thereupon the wooden horse came alive, began to run, circled the courtyard three times, and then, ringing the bell around its neck, soared higher and higher into the sky. Before the startled eyes of the observers, the horse transformed into a blue lion, the young boy turned into Manjusri [the Bodhisattva of wisdom and intellect], and together they disappeared into heaven.

When they witnessed this scene, the people in the courtyard all took the Buddhist reverential posture of pressing their hands flat together as they stood facing the direction in which Manjusri had ascended into heaven. After that time people, beginning with the governor himself, began to take care of the meditation room with faithful hearts.

* Chilboolam, where the legend of the young boy who ascended into heaven riding a wooden horse has been handed down, is located about ten kilometers to the north of Ssanggye

Temple in Hadong county. According to tradition, King Kim Suro, the founder of the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo (A.D. 42-562) constructed this hermitage for the sake of his seven sons who entered the priesthood and attained Buddhahood. Chilboolam was built in the year 119 and never needed reconstruction until recently, for it was burned in the Korean War (1950-1953).

On the left side of this hermitage there is an attention-grabbing meditation chamber called the “ahjabang” on account of its unique shape. Tradition says that this room was built by a monk named Damgong, an expert in *ondol* (traditional Korean under-floor heating system) construction, in the reign of King Hyogong (reigned 897-912) of the Shilla kingdom (A.D. 57-935). The floor of the room is elevated above the ground to knee-height and is in the shape of the Chinese character 亞, which stands for “Asia” and is pronounced “ah.” Its upper level is used for meditation while the bottom level is used for passage. It is unknown how, but this room could be heated for the length of a week or even for an entire month by burning large quantities of wood on a single occasion. Tradition says that only people who master the principle of Eastern dynamics are able to understand the dual *ondol* structure of the ahjabang.

V
**A Man who was Cured of an Incurable Disease:
Sejo the Great and a Young Boy**

The seventh king of the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910), Sejo (1417-1468), ascended to the throne by deposing his young nephew Danjong. One day shortly thereafter, Danjong's mother appeared to him in a dream and scolded him as if to punish him for the wrong he had done:

“Look, my son was so young that as regent you almost had the power of a king. Nevertheless, you dethroned him and banished him and then you pitilessly had the young boy slain. How could you? Did you covet the throne that much? You hateful wretch!”

After she had finished speaking, she spat on him. Upon waking from his dream, Sejo had abscesses all over his body, and he was wracked with a pain that was beyond description. The skill of all the renowned physicians and their miraculous drugs came to naught. Finally Sejo, wholeheartedly repenting of his sin, left for a Buddhist seminary on Mount Ohdae in Kangwon province in order to be cured. He chose that place because Manjusri [the Bodhisattva of wisdom and intellect], was believed to reside there and perform miracles. He stayed at Sangwon Temple on Mount Ohdae and prayed fervently to Manjusri for one hundred days.

On the hundredth day, upon finishing his prayers, Sejo's entire body itched, so he went to bathe in a brook. As he was bathing, he wished that there were someone who could rub his back. Just then, he saw a young boy walking down the road beside the brook. Sejo beckoned to him and asked him to wash his back for him. The lad willingly acceded to his request and rubbed his back so thoroughly that the king had never felt so refreshed. When his bath was over, Sejo thanked the youth and then added:

“Please remember that, wherever you go, you should not tell people that you touched the king's body and washed the ugly abscesses on it.”

The lad smiled and replied:

“I understand, and I also ask you, your Majesty, not to tell people that you met a youth on Mount Ohdae who was Manjusri incarnate.”

Then he vanished as if by magic. Now, the king had made his request because he was concerned that the youth might spread rumors, but when he realized that the lad was none other than Manjusri incarnate, and that he had cured him completely, he was deeply ashamed and puzzled about what to do. He returned to his palace and called an assembly of the greatest painters and sculptors in the country. Sejo had the artists draw Manjusri's figure just as he had seen it, and then had the sculptures make statues from their drawing. This is the very statue of youthful incarnation of Manjusri that stands in the meditation room of Sangwon Temple until this day.

Tradition records several other legends about Sejo's sojourn at Sangwon Temple.

At meal times, he ate with the monks and brought his own utensils just as they did. In monasteries the monks are customarily provided with water before their meal, which they use to wash their chopsticks, spoons, and bowls with after their have eaten. One day, as a young monk was serving this water, he said to Sejo, using the egalitarian term for male devotees in a temple:

“Have some water, Brother.”

The other monks turned pale with fright when they heard him called the king “brother.” They worried that he might exact a heavy punishment upon them all for that effrontery. Quite the contrary, however, Sejo felt honored to be called “brother” and praised the young monk saying:

“Is there anyone besides you who will call me ‘brother?’”

Sejo also gave him a big reward.

On yet another occasion, Sejo went into the sanctum and was about to bow down to the Buddha. Suddenly, a cat materialized and interrupted his prayers by tugging at the hem of his garment. Because of this, Sejo felt that something was amiss, and so he ordered his people to examine the sanctum. Sure enough, they found and apprehended an assassin who was hiding under the altar. Full of gratitude to the cat, Sejo bestowed land upon the temple for the raising of cats, and he also had a statue of a cat erected in front of the sanctum.

Since Sejo not only met and was healed of an incurable disease by Manjusri, but was also saved by a cat while in the temple on Mount Ohdae, he is regarded as a king who received many favors from the Buddha. For this reason, even though Buddhism was often persecuted severely during the Chosun dynasty, Sejo, who understood and accepted Buddhism, rendered remarkable services to it during his reign.

VI

Moving a Residential Temple from one Province to Another: The Wonderful Deed of Priest Boduck

Boduck was the name of a learned and virtuous Buddhist priest who lived during the reign of King Bojang (reigned from 642-682) of the Koguryo kingdom (37 B.C. – A.D. 668). Buddhism had been the hereditary religion of Koguryo since the second year (A.D. 372) of the reign of King Sosurim (ruled 371-384). However, after the twenty-seventh king of the dynasty, Youngryou (reigned from 618-642), accepted Taoism in 624, people gradually began to distance themselves from Buddhism. Now Bojang, the twenty-eighth king, not only pursued Taoism in earnest, he even began to actively proscribe Buddhism.

As a result, in this period only Taoism was studied and taught. Many Buddhist temples were closed or converted into Taoists temples, and Taoists were treated courteously, while Buddhist monks were persecuted. Unable to endure this treatment, such virtuous priests as Hyepyeon, Hyeja, Seungryung, and Hyeguan fled to Japan after the temples in which they had practiced asceticism and striven to enlighten the public were seized by Taoists. While Taoism was favored by the dynasty, the common people felt increasingly resentful of it because of a special tax of ninety liters of rice that each household was obliged to pay to the local Taoist temple.

Deploring this situation, Priest Boduck made a firm resolution, went to the king, and said:

“This country has accepted Buddhism from the beginning, and so its people have lived happily and peacefully with the Buddha’s merciful and harmonious spirit. Now, however, your Majesty persecutes Buddhism and only venerates Taoism. Because of this, all the venerable monks have left this land, and the grudge that the people hold against you has grown serious. In this way, restlessness prevails among the people, and so I am very anxious about the future of this country.”

The king replied:

“I do not want to hear it! Don’t you know that new food is more tempting and that new clothes make you feel refreshed? If you disagree with my deeds, then leave this land right away!”

“This country is troubled and the king’s outlook has been obscured. Well, this must be our destiny. No matter how earnestly I implore him, it is useless. It might indeed be best for me to leave like the other priests,” thought Priest Boduck.

Thereupon he returned to his temple and told his disciples:

“Get ready, for we will leave here early tomorrow morning. Does anyone know of a good place for our seminary to practice austerities?”

One disciple answered him:

“I think that Mount Godal [located in Chunju city and currently named Mount Goduck], which I visited several years ago, might be a suitable place for a seminary.”

“If so, we will move there tomorrow in order to continue our ascetic practices. Keep that in mind,” said Boduck.

The next day, when the monks arose at dawn, they looked around the temple as they chanted their prayers, and they noticed that the surrounding scenery looked different, even though the temple was the same. Perplexed, they observed more carefully and discovered that they were in a totally different place from where they used to live. They ran to their master in astonishment and informed him of this, whereupon Priest Boduck replied:

“Do not be perplexed; last night, I simply moved Ballyong Temple from Pyongyang, where we had practiced asceticism, to this place, Mount Godal in Wansanju.”

This occurred in the ninth year (650) of King Bojang.

Boduck, a very learned and virtuous priest, was especially versed in the Scriptures of Nirvana, so he became the founder of the Nirvana sect of Buddhism in Korea. Tradition says that even the venerable Wonhyo [see story VIII in this section and story V in part IV] learned the Scriptures of Nirvana from Priest Boduck.

Because of this fame, many people heard about Priest Boduck and came to visit him. Whenever anyone came to see him, Boduck told his disciples that he had visitors from his hometown, and so he asked them to treat his guests courteously. The disciples did so, but they grew curious about what he meant when he said he had visitors from his hometown, for when the disciples asked the guests where they were from, they answered that they were from many different places. Therefore, one day a disciple complained to Boduck:

“Master, next time, could you please tell us clearly which people are from your hometown so that we can treat them better than other visitors?”

Priest Boduck replied:

“Do not speak that way. All people are neighbors from the same hometown since no one knows either whence he originated or whither he goes after death. Besides, since the Lord Buddha is their Good Father, all living creatures are His children. How, then, can we treat our sisters and brothers with partiality? Thus, no matter who visits this temple, whether rich or poor, high or low, you should serve all guests equally and earnestly.”

Impressed by these words, the monks never again doubted that all people were indeed from the same hometown.

VII

The Establishment of Haein Temple: The Story of Priest Soonweung and Priest Yijung

In the reign of the Chinese emperor Mooje (502-549), a Buddhist priest named Jigong lay on his deathbed. Handing a book entitled *the Records of Travels to the Mountains in the Eastern Country* to his disciples, he said:

“After I die, two noted priests will come from the Shilla kingdom [one of the earliest Korean dynasties] seeking after the law of Buddha. Give them this book.”

Just as Jigong predicted, after his death two monks named Soonweung and Yijung came to China from Shilla in search of the Buddha’s teachings. The disciples of Priest Jigong welcomed them with great joy, told them their master’s will, and handed *the Records of Travels to the Mountains in the Eastern Country* over to them. Deeply impressed, the two monks visited the pagoda where Priest Jigong’s tomb was located.

It is said:

Although men have a past and a present, the Truth is neither near nor far.

Meditating on this in their search for the Buddha’s teachings, the two monks prayed day and night for a full week. Thereupon, the figure of Priest Jigong appeared from the pagoda and praised the longing of their hearts for Truth. He turned the spirit of his work over to them and said:

“There is a place on the southern part of Mount Woodoo [currently called Mount Gaya], where the laws of Buddha will prosper. Go there and establish a large temple.”

After saying this, Priest Jigong disappeared back into the pagoda, while Yijung and Soonweung worshiped again in front of the pagoda and then returned home to Shilla.

As soon as they concluded their journey in search of the Buddha’s teachings, the two monks set off for Mount Woodoo. When they reached a place where clean water was flowing amongst the beautiful features of the mountains, they sat down and began to meditate. Soon enough, lights of various colors began to radiate out of the foreheads of each monk and to shine high up into the sky.

At just this time, the whole country was in a great state of anxiety. The queen of King Aejang, who ruled from 800-809 and was the fortieth king of Shilla, had contracted an incurable disease. No matter how hard the physicians tried to cure the queen with all possible medicines, they could do her no good. Therefore, the king sent his men all over the country and commanded them to bring virtuous priests to his court.

One of the king’s servants who was out looking for venerable priests passed by Mount Woodoo and saw sacred lights shining into the sky, so he made his way through the woods trying to find their source. When he reached it, he saw the two monks, Soonweng and

Yijung, immersed in meditation. The servant bowed politely to them and told them why he was there. After hearing his story, the two monks gave him a ball of thread of various colors and told him to tie one of its ends to a branch of the pear tree in the front courtyard of the palace and the other end to an iron-ring handle.

When he returned to the palace, the servant did as he had been bidden. No sooner had he done so than the pear tree in front of the palace withered and the queen was completely cured. The king, the queen, and all the members of the court were highly delighted.

Out of gratitude, King Aejang visited the two monks on Mount Woodoo and established a large temple there to express his thanks. This temple is none other than Haein. All these things occurred in the third year (802) of King Aejang.

VIII

The Story of the Foundation of Naewon Temple: The Miracle of the Venerable Wonhyo

The fame of the venerable Wonhyo, an erudite monk and priest who had attained a form of spiritual enlightenment beyond the conception of ordinary people, spread out of Korea and into China and Japan. One day, when he was immersed in meditation while facing in the direction of China, he saw that the hill behind Woonje Temple on Mount Jongnam in Jangan, China, was about to collapse in a landslide caused by a flood. At that time, Woonje Temple was a famous meditation center in which a thousand people studied and practiced meditation. Wonhyo realized that a thousand lives were in danger, and so he sent the thick board on which sat flying to China.

Immediately thereafter, a monk circumambulating Woonje Temple saw a strange object spinning in the middle of the yard, and so he ran into the meditation room and told the others about it. As soon as all the people had come out into the yard to see the odd object floating in the air, a landslide crushed the meditation room and destroyed the temple. Having been saved by this miracle, the thousand people thanked and worshipped the floating object with their hands joined together. Thereupon the board fell to the ground and they read the following words, which were written upon it:

“Wonhyo of Shilla saves masses by throwing this board.”

All those who read this admired Wonhyo’s supernatural power and so they went to Shilla to see him and ask him to accept them as his disciples. The venerable Wonhyo willingly granted their request. He searched about widely for a place in which to teach these people the practice of asceticism before deciding on a spot in southern Kyungnam Province. When Wonhyo appeared with his thousand followers, the spirit guardian of Mount Wonjuck greeted them and said:

“There is a good place on this mountain for a thousand people to practice austerities, so come and organize your association of ascetics.”

They followed the guardian spirit of the mountain until they reached the place where the current Sansin (“guardian spirit of a mountain”) Pavilion of Naewon Temple is located, and the spirit thereupon disappeared.

Wonhyo went into the valley on the left side of the mountain, established Naewon Temple, and built eighty-eight hermitages in which to teach his thousand disciples to attain enlightenment.

One day, in order to get food for his pupils, Wonhyo went to the richest man in the village and asked him to fill his bowl with some food. Miraculously, no matter how much rice was poured into it, the little bowl was not filled. The rich man was so impressed by Wonhyo’s supernatural powers that he began to visit Naewon Temple and to offer rice for its thousand denizens every year.

Wonhyo used to beat a drum on Mount Wonjuck in order to gather the people together in the field at the foot of the mountain so that he could teach them the *Avatamska Sutra*. (Consequently, this field has ever after been called the Avatamska Field, and the summit of Mount Wonjuck has been called “gathering drum peak.”) Now, the people who heard the sound of the drum and went to the Avatamska Field frequently used to stumble over arrowroot vines, so Wonhyo commanded the mountain spirit to remove all the arrowroot vines, and tradition holds that arrowroot has not grown on this mountain ever since.

There is a common proverbial four Chinese-character expression, “field-lectern-law-seat (野壇法席),” which is used to describe the noisy bustle of a crowded place where many people are gathered together. This saying originated in order to describe the vast field where Wonhyo made seats and began to teach people the laws of the Buddha.

All one thousand of Wonhyo’s students attained enlightenment and became venerable, and so Mount Wonjuck has ever since also been known as Mount Chonsung (“one thousand venerables”). Twelve monks from among his followers, having served in various ways, then went to other places where they achieved enlightenment and attained Nirvana. Eight of them went to Donghwa Temple in the city of Daegu, while the other four went to Daesung Temple in Moonkyung. Ever since, the mountain seat of the former temple has been known as Mount Pahlgong (“eight gentlemen”), while that of the latter is called Mount Sabul (“four Buddhas”).

This story is written in the *Lives of the Great Priests of Dang*, and the hermitage named Chuckpan (“thrown board”), which was built in memory of the venerable Wonhyo’s miraculous board-throwing, remains to this day in Jangan Temple on Mount Buldkwang, which is in Jangan township, Donglae county in Kyungnam province.

IX

Dreaming a Strange Dream: The First Story of the Venerable Muhak and Yi Sungkye

Yi Sungkye (1335-1408) was the original name of Taejo, the first king (reigned 1392-1398) of the Chosun dynasty (1392-1910). In his youth, deploring the political corruption of the Koryo dynasty and aspiring to greatness, he traveled all over the country practicing the military arts, cultivating his mind, visiting famous mountain temples, and praying to the gods of heaven and earth and to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for their help and protection. The following story occurred while he was in the city of Anbyun in Hamkyung province.

One night Yi Sungkye had a dream. When he awoke the next morning and reflected upon his dream, he could not understand what it meant. Unable to fathom its meaning on his own, he went to an old fortuneteller who was known as the best of dream readers and asked her to interpret the dream for him.

The fortuneteller listened to his dream narrative, remained lost in thought for a while, and then said cautiously:

“How can a mere old woman dare to interpret a great man’s dream? If you walk about sixteen kilometers to the west, you will reach Mount Suhlbonng, where you will find a priest in a cave on the mountain. Go to him and he will interpret your dream for you.”

Yi Sungkye followed her directions and arrived at Mount Suhlbonng. When he entered the cave where the priest dwelled, he found him immersed in meditation. He waited politely for the priest to finish his practices, then bowed deeply to him and explained why he had come to see him:

“I am a person who lives in this world, but I have come to see you because of some dubious matter. Please have mercy on me and teach me.”

“Tell me what has happened to you,” the priest replied.

“I had a dream last night, and no matter how hard I try, I cannot figure out what it means, so I have come here to ask you about it. In my dream, I saw all of the roosters in a village crowing at the same time, and there was a shower of flowers falling from the sky. I went into an old shed, took three rafters onto my back, and as I was carrying them out of the shack, I heard the crash of a mirror and awoke. Do you think that this dream is an evil omen?”

Thereupon the priest interpreted the dream:

“Well, if you really dreamed such a dream, then you must be very wary of telling others about it. Since there is no one else here now, listen to me carefully. All the village roosters simultaneously crying “ko-kee-oh” (“cock-a-doodle-doo”) means “high-precious-rank” [the meaning of these sounds in the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters 高貴位], and so this means that you will definitely rise to a high office. Then you say that you went into an old shed and took three rafters on your back. Well, this shape is the same as the Chinese

character ‘王’, which means ‘king.’”

Upon hearing this, Yi Sungkye contained his excitement and asked again:

“What about the flowers raining from the sky and the crashing sound of a mirror breaking?”

Without saying a word, the priest took a writing brush, composed the following poem, and gave it to Yi Sungkye:

If flowers fall, then there will be fruit.

If a mirror is broken, how could there be no sound?

The priest then scrutinized Yi Sungkye’s visage and said him:

“As I look upon your face, I can see that it is filled with regal *kee* (“energy”), but since your worldly spirit remains, you will have to pray to the sages and do virtuous deeds. Now, only I know about this matter, and I will keep it secret. You, oh general, should not open your mouth to tell anybody else about your dream. You will have to wait for another three years before this comes to pass. During this time, build a temple here to deify five hundred Arahats, and pray fervently.”

Upon hearing these words, Yi Sungkye stood up and asked the priest to be his master. Thereafter, Yi Sungkye established a temple named Seokwang in Ahnbyun, the city of his birth. After that, Yi Sungkye asked the priest for his advice in all serious matters, and when he founded the Chosun dynasty and became its first king, he made the priest his personal counselor and spiritual guide. The name of this priest is the venerable Muhak.

X

In Order to Deify Five Hundred Arahats: The Second Story of the Venerable Muhak and Yi Sungkye

After the venerable Muhak prophesized that Yi Sungkye's dream meant that he would become king, he told him to build up his credit in Heaven and honor five hundred Buddhist monks who had attained Nirvana by founding a temple. As a result, Yi Sungkye established Seokwang Temple, with its Eungjin sanctuary for the deification of the five hundred Arahats. Soon after that, Yi Sungkye heard that Kwangjuck Temple in the city of Kilju in Hamkyung province had been destroyed by the fires of war, and so he decided to take those parts of the *Tripitaka* (the complete canon of Buddhist scriptures) that were not burned, together with five hundred statues of Arahats, from the remains.

When these five hundred stone statues were moved to Seokwang Temple, they were shipped from Kilju to Wonsan, where Yi Sungkye himself wholeheartedly carried each of them into place. After he had enshrined four hundred and ninety-eight statues in Seokwang Temple one-by-one, he grew so weary of going back and forth that he transported the last two statues together at one time.

The next morning, however, when Yi Sungkye looked around after offering his prayers, he could not find the last statue that he had carried the preceding day. Frightened, he searched all around the temple, but he could not discover it anywhere, and eventually he was forced to give up. He then fell asleep, whereupon the missing statue appeared to him in a dream and said:

“You carried each of the other statues on your back and enshrined them with a faithful heart, but when it was my turn, you did not transport me independently, you carried me along with another. How could you have acted in such bad faith? Because I did not wish to receive such unkind treatment, I went to the Biro hermitage on Mount Myohyang.”

Terrified, Yi Sungkye awoke and realized that he had been dreaming. He sent one of his retainers to examine the Biro hermitage, and indeed, a new statue of an Arahat had materialized there. Yi Sungkye repented of what he had done, went there in person, and carried the statue back with him. However, the statue disappeared again the next morning. When he realized that there was nothing that could be done about the situation, he enshrined a nameplate in place of the statue. This is why there is one statue short of the five hundred statues of Arahats in Eungjin sanctuary of Seokwang Temple.

Having deified the five hundred statues of the Arahats in this way, Yi Sungkye offered them fervent prayers for three years, and ultimately he did found the Chosun dynasty and became its first king.

After he had ascended to the throne, Yi Sungkye searched high and low all over the country for the venerable Muhak so that he could have the benefit of his counsel. However, he could not find any trace of him. Thereupon, he commanded the governors of all the

provinces to find the venerable Muhak and to bring him along with them. When the governors reached the city of Goksan, they heard of a priest who was living in a cottage on Mount Godal. Wondering if he might be the venerable Muhak, three of them rejected their servants' pleas to remain where they were and went up the summit of the mountain. When they reached the peak, they hung their official seals on the branches of a pine tree and headed for the cottage. They found an old man with sparkling eyes weeding with a hoe. The governors asked him:

"Do you know who built this hermitage?"

"I did," replied the old man.

"What made you build your hermitage here on this rough mountainside?"

"It is possible to see Samin ("three seals") peak from here," he responded.

The governors asked him again:

"Why do you call the mountain peak 'three seals?'"

The old man answered:

"I named it so because I thought that if I built a cottage here, some day three governors would come and hang their seals on the branches of that tree."

Upon hearing these words, the three governors stood up in amazement and paid homage to the old man, for indeed it turned out that he was the venerable Muhak. Having ascertained this, they told him that the king greatly desired to see him, and so they led him to him.

Yi Sungkye, as King Taejo, was overjoyed to have the venerable Muhak as his personal counselor and spiritual guide, and forthwith asked his advice about moving the capital of the country in the near future. Tradition says that the venerable Muhak courteously and repeatedly refused to counsel the king, but in the end was unable to deny him, and so he told the king that the ideal location for his capital was Hanyang (now renamed Seoul), and that it was there he should build his royal palace.

XI

From Kanghwa Island to Haein Temple: The Conveyance of the *Tripitaka Koreana* [The complete Buddhist canon on 80,000 wooden printing blocks]

The *Tripitaka Koreana*, which is safeguarded in Haein Temple, was engraved on wooden blocks in the time of Gojong (reigned 1213-1259), the 23rd king of the Koryo dynasty (918-1392). The *Tripitaka Koreana* is sometimes called the *Koryo Tripitaka* (because it was made in the Koryo dynasty) and sometimes the *Palman* (eighty thousand) *Tripitaka* because it consists of over 80,000 wooden printing blocks. In fact, before this time, there was another *Tripitaka* called the *Chojo Tripitaka*, which means the “first edition.” This was divided and part of it was enshrined inside the nine-story wooden pagoda in Hwangryong Temple near the city of Kyungju while the other part was kept in Kuin Temple in the city of Daegu. However, the *Chojo Triptiatka* was burned in both places during the Mongol invasion of 1232, the 19th year of Gojong's reign. Thereafter, a new *Tripitaka* was engraved in order both to restore the public morale that had been lost during the foreign incursion and to invoke the Buddha's divine protection in the event of such national crises. This new *Tripitaka* was the *Tripitaka Koreana*, which exists to this day.

Tripitaka is the term for the complete canon of all the sacred writings of Buddhism, such as scriptures, commandments, and doctrines. There are various versions of the *Tripitaka* in various languages—Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, and classical Chinese. There are also versions of the *Tripitaka* in Mongolian and in Manchu, which are translations from the Tibetan and classical Chinese texts. The *Tripitaka Koreana*, in classical Chinese, is generally accorded to be the most perfect and most superior version of them all in terms of both the quantity of textual material and the quality of their preservation.

In the 23rd year of Gojong's reign (1236), the carving of the *Tripitaka Koreana*, which has since been enshrined in Haein Temple, began in official government printing centers located on Kanghwa Island (off the west coast of Korea, near Seoul), the location of the temporary capital at that time, and in the cities of Chunju and Namhae. It was completed sixteen years later in the 38th year of Gojong's reign (1251). At first, the *Tripitaka Koreana* was enshrined in Sunwon Temple on Kanghwa Island. Thereafter, it was moved to Jichun Temple in Hanyang (the capital of the Chosun Dynasty, and a former name of Seoul) in the seventh year of Taejo's reign (1398) and enshrined there for a while before it was finally relocated to Haein Temple.

There were several reasons why the *Tripitaka Koreana* had to be moved to Haein Temple from Kanghwa Island. In the first place, Kanghwa Island was no longer a safe place because of the constant pillaging of Japanese pirates during the last days of the Koryo dynasty and the beginning of the Yi dynasty. Haein Temple, on the other hand, was a much safer place to enshrine the *Tripitaka* because it is located on Mount Gaya, which was known as a holy

mountain, and was so remote that people hardly ever approached it.

The procession that moved the *Tripitaka* was led by a lad waving an incense burner to purify the air along the route and by monks chanting sutras. Following them came masses of people, some of whom led ox carts carrying securely packed printing blocks of the *Tripitaka*, some of whom carried parcels of blocks in A-frame carriers on their backs, still others of whom ported them in bundles on their heads, and all of whom prayed for peace for the country and strove to carve the Buddha's teachings on their hearts. This procession wound on foot through Seoul to Haein Temple on Mount Gaya as the *Tripitaka* was moved. (In Japan, there is another tradition according to which the *Tripitaka* was loaded onto a ship in the Han River, conveyed to a village that is currently called Gaepo in Goryung country downstream of the Nakdong River, and there unloaded and moved to Haein Temple. Because of this, the former name of the village was Gaekyungpo, which means a harbor where scriptures are unloaded.) This great conveyance of the *Tripitaka Koreana* begun in the seventh year of Taejo's reign (May, 1398) and went on for six months before it was completely enshrined in the first year of Jungjong's reign (January, 1399).

The raw material for the printing blocks of the *Tripitaka Koreana* was obtained from the lumber of white birch trees from the islands off the west and south coasts of Korea (such as Guhje Island, Wan Island, and Cheju Island). It is obvious that the process of production was very complicated and required many hands. The raw lumber was first seasoned by being soaked in seawater for three years; after printing blocks had been carved from this wood, these were boiled in seawater, and then dried in the shade for another three years. Only then were both sides of the blocks engraved in relief in the printed style of Gu Yangsoon (a famous Chinese calligrapher of that time). Finally, they were finished with a lacquer coat in order to prevent them from being worm-eaten. Because of this careful and sincere devotion in their production, the block of the *Tripitaka Koreana* have been well preserved for over seven hundred years and until this very day they are in perfect condition, unwarped and undamaged by either the damp or by insects.

In all there are 81,340 individual wooden plaques, but since the texts are engraved on both sides of each block, there is actually a sum total of 162,680 printing blocks. Each face of each block is engraved with at least 5,238 characters. Each block weighs about 3.5 kilograms, is 67 centimeters long, 23 centimeters wide, and 3 centimeters thick. In order to prevent their warping, the four edges were secured by scantling, and the joints were decorated with copper. The *Tripitaka Koreana* comprises 1,516 different major texts, subdivided into 6,815 different individual volumes. This scale is such that, even if one were to read a book each day, it would take more than eighteen years to complete the entire canon.

The production of the *Tripitaka* is especially remarkable considering that it was carried out as the whole country was being overrun by Mongolian hordes and so the capital had to take refuge on Kanghwa Island. It is truly miraculous that the collecting of manuscripts, making of copies, reading of proofs, finishing of wooden printing blocks, and the carving of scriptures

upon them letter by letter were all carried out during the fifteen years of the refugee period. Furthermore, the fact that hundreds of noted calligraphers and thousands of engravers were mobilized for the production of this great work indicates that there was a unity of purpose and belief in Buddhism shared by the court retainers and the common people. It is an amazing fact that not one word has been misspelled and not one character has been omitted on any of the printing blocks. Finally, even the calligraphic style is so consistently uniform that all the blocks appear as if they have been written by only one person.

The *Tripitaka Koreana* is a world heritage both in name and reality, and a precious Buddhist treasure on which the teachings of the Buddha are written. None of the other thirty-odd existing *Tripitakas* in the world have as systematic a range of texts, as large a number of perfect copies, or the textual accuracy of the *Tripitaka Koreana*. For this reason, the modern Japanese *Sinsu Tripitaka* was modeled after the *Tripitaka Koreana*.

The teachings of the Lord Buddha show the way of Truth to all people who want to live lives worthy of the name of men, and so Haein Temple, which houses the most original and complete edition of the richest Buddhist canon, is not only a Korean national treasure, but also a sacred place for Buddhists from all over the world.

XII

Meeting a Three-Eyed King: The Origin of the *Sakan Tripitaka*

Haein Temple is referred to as a temple housing a national treasure because it holds the *Tripitaka Koreana*. However, the temple contains not only the *Tripitaka Koreana*, which was made by the will and effort of the entire nation, but also the *Sakan Tripitaka*, which was produced in the temple itself. There is an interesting legend about the origin of the *Sakan Tripitaka* enshrined in Haein Temple.

A man named Yi Guhin once lived in the city of Hapchun in South Kyung-sang province. Although he was very poor, he had a very kind nature. Thus, the townspeople assigned him to a position analogous to that of chief of a neighborhood office today.

One autumnal day, Yi Guhin found a three-eyed puppy as he returned from the town market. He took it home with him, made it his pet, and raised it with good care. However, three years later the dog died suddenly, without any trace of disease, as it was sitting and gazing up at the sun. Yi Guhin held a funeral and a memorial service for his dog, just as he would have done if his own child had died. The year after that, Yi Guhin himself suddenly died of a disease.

When Yi Guhin went to the nether world and looked around, he saw a three-eyed king sitting on high. Officials and jailers were standing on either side of the king in the fashion of the morning session of a royal court. As soon as the three-eyed king saw Yi Guhin, he stood up, ran to him, and, grasping his hand, said:

“What business has brought you here, oh my master? Several years ago, I erred here in the nether world and so was banished to the human world in the body of a dog. While I was living in exile for three years, my master gave me generous treatment—and now I am seeing him again! How can I repay my obligation?”

Saying this, the king ushered him to a seat. Yi Guhin, thinking of what happened to him in the past, said with tearful eyes:

“As a person of low birth, I am not educated at all and I have no knowledge. How will I be able to respond to the Great King Yama’s questions?”

“Master, listen to me carefully and follow my directions to answer Yama (the Lord of the Netherworld),” replied the three-eyed king.

Yi Guhin bowed his head, listened attentively to the king, and then, following a messenger, went to Yama. The Great King Yama asked him:

“What have you done in the world?”

“I have taken charge of my town since I was young and so I have not had many opportunities to keep on doing good deeds. It is sad that I was called to come here all of a sudden, though, for I was planning to complete a Buddhist work,” answered Yi Guhin.

“What kind of work were you not able to complete because you were called here?” asked

Yama.

“I have heard that the teaching of the Buddha is very valuable, so I planed to copy the Buddhist scriptures so that I might hand them down to posterity. However, I cannot accomplish this since I have come here,” replied Yi Guhin.

When he heard this, the Great King Yama ordered a judge to find Yi Guhin’s name on the list of the dead, extend his life for ten years, and send him back to the world. Furthermore, Yama himself went to the gate to see Yi Guhin off and ask him to do what he had not completed in the world.

When Yi Guhin left Yama, he went to the three-eyed king and told him what had happened. The king was delighted and said:

“Do not worry about the seriousness of this matter, oh my master. When you go back to the world, make a book, bring it to a stationer, and ask him to write words for the promotion of virtue. Entitle the book *The Words of Virtuous Deeds in the Tripitaka*, go to the authorities to get their seal for it, and then wait for me. I will soon visit the human world.”

Yi Guhin kept this in mind and left him. He woke up, stretched himself, and felt as if he had been living a dream.

In the meantime, two princesses were ill in bed and all the skilled physicians in the country, with all their good medicines, were unable to help them. One day, the two princesses opened their mouths together and said to the king:

“Bring us *The Words of Virtuous Deeds in the Tripitaka*. If you do not, we will not be healed.”

The king gave the command, and the governor of the city of Hapchun made Yi Guhin go to the palace with the words for the promotion of virtue. When Yi Guhin arrived at the palace, one of the two princesses said to him:

“How have you been all this while? I am the three-eyed king. I came here to keep my promise to you.”

Thereupon the three-eyed king said to the king of the country:

“Listen to me carefully, oh king. I am the tree-eyed king from the nether world. Yi Guhin once came to the nether world, but the Great King Yama restored him to life so that he could engrave the *Tripitaka* and spread its words throughout the human world. Therefore, I ask you to be his benefactor and to help him complete this work. If you do this, not only will the two princesses be healed, but this country will be more peaceful and you yourself will live a long life without illness.”

When the king accepted this proposal, the three-eyed king said goodbye to Yi Guhin and departed from the princess’ body. Thereupon the two princesses were completely cured, came to their senses, and said to the king:

“Oh father King, if good deeds are done even in the nether world, how can we, in this world, neglect this valuable Buddhist work?”

When he heard this, the king treated Yi Guhin courteously and offered him the use of his

private property. Furthermore, he gathered together excellent craftsmen from all over the country, obtained the necessary wood, had the *Sakan Tripitaka* engraved, enshrined it in Haein Temple on Mount Gaya, and finally held a series of twelve memorial services.

Tradition says that Yi Guhin and his wife lived long and in peace, doing virtuous deeds to their neighbors.

XIII

A Monk who Used to Ride a Tiger: The Story of Priest Hwanjuck

In the Chosun dynasty, there lived a priest named Hwanjuck. He was born in 1603 and entered the priesthood in Bokchun Temple on Mount Songri when he was eleven years old. In the twilight of his life, when he was eighty-one years old, he found a cave called Hwanjuck Dae over Backryunam (“small temple”) on Mount Gaya. He dwelled in that cave with a lad to care for him, and he practiced asceticism until he passed into Nirvana in 1690, his eighty-eighth year.

When Hwanjuck devoted himself to the practice of his austerities, a tiger used to come to him and sit with his head down.

“Although you were born as an animal in this world, I hope that you will be born as a human being in the next world so that you can study,” the priest said to the tiger, and he used to preach the teachings of the Buddha to him.

Once in a while the tiger came to see the priest and to listen to his preaching, and when the priest went out, the tiger carried him on his back and threaded his way across Mount Gaya.

One day, the serving boy was preparing some food for the priest while he was away on a visit. While he was chopping, he accidentally cut his finger. Not wanting to waste the drops of blood that flowed from the cut, the lad dripped the blood into the tiger’s mouth. However, as soon as the tiger tasted the blood, his flesh-eating habit returned to him, and so he ate the youth.

As he returned from his visit, the priest wondered why he met neither the lad nor the tiger, both of whom used to come out to meet him. When he arrived at his cave, the lad was nowhere to be seen, but the tiger was seated in low spirit, clearly at a loss. The priest looked around and saw bloodstains all over the ground. As soon as he saw this, he realized what had happened.

Priest Hwanjuck scolded the tiger severely, called the guardian spirit of Mount Gaya, and asked him to prevent tigers coming to Mount Gaya so that there would be no more victims of tigers on that mountain. Indeed, tradition says that no one has been injured by a tiger on Mount Gaya since that time.

XIV

Reading Buddhist Writings to Cows: The Story of Hansan and Seupdeuk

Hansan and Seupdeuk are legendary figures who lived during the Dang Dynasty in China. The exact years of their existence is not recalled, but tradition says they lived around the period 625-650. These two men stayed at Gukchung Temple together with a priest named Punggan, and so people referred to the three of them as Gukchung-sam-eun (“Gukchung-three-recluse”), meaning the three venerables who lived their lives in seclusion at Gukchung Temple. All three were incarnations of Bodhisattvas: Punggan was Amitabha, Hansan was Manjusri, and Seupdeuk was Samantabhadra. Not knowing this, however, people in those days did not understand their sayings and doings, and so despised them and treated them with contempt.

Hansan was named thus because he had lived in Han Am (“cave”) near Gukchung Temple. He was always dressed in rags and wore heavy clogs. At mealtimes, he used to visit Gukchung Temple and beg rice, vegetables, and other food that people leftover after they had finished eating. When he came to the temple he would circle it, and sometimes he yelled or used abusive language while looking up at the sky. Whenever the monks of the temple, wielding sticks, drove him away, Hansan left while clapping his hands and laughing loudly.

Seupdeuk (“finding and picking up”) was so-named because priest Punggan had found him crying, wrapped in swaddling clothes on a path, and he had picked up the baby, taken it with him, and raised him. Seupdeuk worked in the kitchen of Gukchung Temple, washing dishes or tending the fire. He saved leftover rice and the residue of other foods, which he gave to Hansan whenever he came to the temple.

One day, the chief priest was returning to the temple from a visit, and when he was passing by a ranch at the foot of the mountain, he saw Hansan and Seupdeuk playing with a herd of cows. Hansan was speaking to the cows thus:

“My fellows in asceticism! How do you feel about being cows? Because you only ate and played, now you look like this! Well, today I have come here to share some Buddhist writings with you, so please step forward in answer to your names. First, Priest Kyungjin of Donghwa Temple!”

Mooing as it was called, a black cow stepped up, bent its forefeet, put its head to the ground, and went to the place where it was directed.

“Next is Priest Hyunjin of Chunkwan Temple!” shouted Hansan.

This time, a yellow cow moored, bowed, and followed the first cow. This process was repeated about thirty times, for some thirty of the one hundred cows were reincarnations of priests. They had become cows as retribution for their deeds in their former lives, which they had wasted on dining and in being lazy in their studying.

Observing this scene, the chief priest of Gukchung Temple felt a cold chill pass through

him, and so he hurried up to the temple as if he were being chased, muttering to himself:

“I thought that Hansan and Seupdeuk were insane. However, it is now an obvious fact that they are incarnations of venerables.”

In the meantime, a governor named Yeo Guyoun started for his new post in a nearby town, where he soon fell ill. All the medicines of the most skilled physicians proved useless for him. When Priest Punggan learned of this, he went to the governor. After he heard about the state of Yeo Guyoun’s disease, Priest Punggan had a bowl filled with water, uttered an incantation over it, and then sprinkled the water on Yeo Guyoun, who thereupon got up as if he were not sick at all.

The governor rewarded priest Punggan generously and asked him to preach a sermon, but he refused, saying:

“Ask Manjusri and Samantabhadra.”

Thereupon the governor asked Punggan:

“Where are the two Bodhisattvas?”

“They are tending the fire and washing dishes in Gukchung Temple. Their names are Hansan and Seupdeuk,” replied priest Punggan.

Thereafter, the governor prepared some presents and set off for Gukchung Temple. When he arrived, Hansan and Seupdeuk were sitting by a brazier and laughing and talking to each other. The governor approached and bowed down to them. A monk who observed this said in astonishment:

“For what reason do you, oh official, bow down to these crazy men?”

Paying no attention to this, Hansan took the governor’s hand and said, laughing:

“Punggan talked nonsense. Why are you visiting us, not knowing that Punggan is Amitabha?”

After he spoke thus, Hansan left the temple and never visited it again. Yeo Guyoun was not satisfied with his visit, so he went to the cave at Han Am, bringing presents such as clothes and medicine, held a worship service, and waited for their words.

“A thief! A thief!”

Hansan and Seupdeuk called these two words and entered the cave, whereupon the stone door began to close by itself. Soon afterwards, the cave was sealed perfectly and some words were heard from within the chasm:

“I say to you, make endeavors by yourselves.”

Even though he had met the three venerables, Yeo Guyoun was reluctant to go back home without listening to any teachings of the Buddha from them. Therefore, he collected all the poems that the three venerables had written on the leaves of trees in the woods, on rock walls, and on the walls of houses. The total number of poems was three hundred, which he edited into a book entitled *The Writings of the Three Hermits*. This book was then translated into Korean with the title, *The Poems of Hansan*.

Here is a poem that shows the simple and innocent lives of Hansan and Seupdeuk:

Ha! Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! Ho! Let's live with laughter!
A smiling face without concern invites less anguish,
Make all the worries of this world just like my smiling face.
There is no end to people's concern and anxiety;
Furthermore, the great moral principal blooms from smiling faces.
When sovereign and subject become unified, a country is likely to rise in the world.
When father and son are in accord, a family is likely to be happy,
There is nothing that does not go well when people agree with one another.
When a couple lives with smile between them, their conjugal harmony becomes stronger.
When host and guest meet together, they feel happy for each other.
When the upper and lower classes are friendly to each other, there is dignity in their
pleasure.
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! Ho! Let's live with laughter!